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THE PRAYER OF LADY MACBETH: HOW THE CONTRACEPTIVE MENTALITY HAS NEUTERED RELIGIOUS LIFE

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The following paper was delivered during the national meeting of the Institute on Religious Life held in Chicago April 16-18, 1993. The theme of this meeting was "Religious Life and Family Life: Co-Partners in the Mission of the Church."

“UNSEX ME HERE!” LADY MACBETH’S PRAYER, SIGNIFICANTLY, WAS MADE TO THE gods of death - “you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts” - and we remember with a shudder how completely and vividly her plea was answered. She was, largely though not entirely, a contrivance of fiction, and yet Shakespeare’s powerful and gruesome anti-heroine was a forerunner of a species of Christian for whom the conjunction of prayer, personal resolve, and the negation of life produced a radically new thing, a third order of sexuality - a way of being human that is neither authentically male nor recognizably female, neither inceptive nor receptive of life, neither ordered to creation nor designed to nurture: “Unsex me here!”

It is important to notice that when Lady Macbeth prays that she be unsexed, she is pleading not for a diminishment of libido but for a freedom from compassion. The juices of sexual frenzy may flow unchecked; it is the promptings of motherhood that must be ripped clean away.

Come to my woman’s breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances You wait on
nature’s mischief!

The upshot is that it is not lust, but life, that must be alienated from the votaries of this Third Order of the Unsexed. The question I have been asked to address is, “Has the contraceptive mentality affected religious life?” The short answer is Yes, emphatically. I want to use the prayer of Lady Macbeth to discuss the paradox of celibate men and women recentering their lives on a contraceptive worldview. The contraceptive mentality is more than the conviction that artificial birth control is morally licit. It comprises an extensive fabric of attitudes about sin, religious authority, human fulfillment, as well as sexuality - attitudes that are determinative of choices central to every human life, including those for whom personal fertility and infertility are utterly irrelevant issues. Contraceptive acts, and their moral condemnation, are equally ancient. As is well known, the contraceptive crisis was brought into being with the development and marketing of orally administered anovulants. The Pill (or, as it is irreverently known in Britain, the

Tablet) focussed the moral issues and polarized the champions of rival solutions decisively and irrevocably. This is not simply, or even primarily, the consequence of what is misleadingly called the Sexual Revolution brought on by the Pill. The Sexual Revolution was no revolution at all but the normal operation of social laws of gravity. “Folks done more of what they done before” simply because one constraint - fear of unwanted pregnancy - was eased. The water of sexual libido ran downhill after a sluice-gate was opened: no surprise there. No, the real revolution occasioned by the Pill not was not sexual but religious.

Contraception has traditionally been censured as an instance of sexual misdemeanor, and sexual sins have generally been treated by moralists of all traditions as sins of the weakness of will. Pagan, Christian, Moslem and Jew knew equally well that it’s wrong for the head of the household to sport with the dairy maid, but recognized that in a moment of weakness a man generally resolved to live uprightly could succumb to temptation. The understanding of remorse, penance and reconciliation varied widely, but all acknowledged the phenomenon of lust mastering the moment. The Pill changed all that. To contracept by this method involved not a surrender to the urgent passions of an instant but an action - better, a series of actions - clearly foreseen and assented to in cold blood, passionlessly, with deliberation and resolve. The majority report of Pope Paul VI’s commission on birth control clumsily attempted to assimilate use of the Pill to the class of human actions undertaken impulsively, but this concession was rightly rejected with scorn by Catholic couples who insisted that they embarked on contraception as a consciously (and, in their view, conscientiously) studied choice. To those who had made their peace with the Pill in the early ‘60s, the shock delivered by *Humanae vitae* was staggering. It still is.

“Unsex me here!” begged Lady Macbeth,
 . . . make thick my blood.
 Stop up th’access and passage to remorse

That no compunctious visitings of nature
 Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
 Th’effect and it.

This is not a person trying to justify the ill means to a contemplated good end, or someone asking for pardon after the fact for an acknowledged wrongdoing. She prays to be rid of the access to remorse, to get beyond questions of conscience entirely.

She resolves to be fixed on her purpose and on it alone, to the exclusion of all other considerations. Once the Church included the choice to contracept by means of the Pill in the class of morally condemned actions, no Catholic could leave the confessional in doubt about his capacity to “sin no more” in this respect (as, say, a penitent might doubt his strength to avoid the sins of fornication or blasphemy). Contraception involves no temptation at all in the sense of pressure to yield to an impulse (Was Lady Macbeth *tempted* to murder Duncan?) but rather the resolution to lead one’s life in defiance of the Church. To contracept while attempting to remain a Catholic accordingly required the development of an entirely novel religious stance, a stance founded on two beliefs: first, the



Vivien Leigh as Lady Macbeth in the 1955 film adaptation.

conviction that the teaching Church is wrong in an area in which she explicitly claims authority; and second, the conviction that a Catholic can coherently hold that the Church is wrong in one place and right (or right enough) in others such that Church membership remains a conscientious and meaningful choice.¹

Even on the pastoral level, very few religious were directly affected by the face-value content of *Humanae vitae*. Yet the religious stance that emerged in the rejection of *Humanae vitae* was of paramount importance to their lives. For it involves the belief that there is a higher, or deeper, or at any rate more reliable mediator of God’s will than the teaching Church. This point cannot be stressed too much. If the Church is wrong in *Humanae vitae*, the judgment that it is wrong can only be made with reference to some standard. That standard, obviously, cannot

be the Church herself; some contend that it is moral intuition, others a more academically respectable reading of scripture or of the history of doctrine; still others some comprehensive system of ethics or logic. But the crucial point is that whatever standard is taken as fundamentally reliable, this standard judges the Church, and is not judged by her. Here is the real revolution incited by the Pill; next to it the rise in promiscuity is a mere flutter. As did their lay married counterparts, religious men and women instinctively perceived (and in many cases, rushed toward) the breach in the dam of doctrine and discipline caused by adoption of this new standard. Keep in mind that this new crisis is of an entirely different order from the classical moral controversies in Church history, which involved the laxity and rigor of the Church's treatment of what all parties to the dispute agreed to be sins. Dissenters from *Humanae vitae* are about something else entirely, for they maintain that an action specifically and categorically condemned by the Church may be contemplated and chosen in good will as a licit option by a conscientious Catholic.

Suppose for a moment that a Catholic comes to believe that the teaching Church is wrong in condemning contraception but right about everything else. How does he judge the Church wrong in the one case? As we have seen, by reference to some standard that is more reliable than the Church. But how does he judge the Church to be right in the other million-and-one instances? Obviously, only in virtue of the same standard by which he found her defective. It is absurd, not to say insane, to claim that one obeys, or is faithful to, the Church in those areas in which he happens to agree with her - because "happens to agree" is the operative phrase. If my pocket calculator has proved unreliable in one calculation, I might still maintain that it "gives true answers" for other calculations, but not all others: only, in fact, those which I have some reason to believe to be true. And my basis for judging the instrument accurate in these other computations cannot be the calculator itself - but rather some norm (a mathematical table, my own longhand reckonings) that I take to be fundamentally sound. Consequently, it is absurd to say that I can *depend* on my calculator where it gives me true answers, since my use of the word "depend" expresses nothing more than a simple convergence between the calculator's answer and the true one.² And it is important to stress that once I have found a more reliable instrument, the less reliable one is superfluous - worthless, in fact. I can only hold on to it for sentimental reasons. By the same token, once my paramount

theory of ethics or my personal religious intuition has proved more reliable than the Church, my continued association with the Church can never be more profound than a "*mater, si! magistra, no!*" aestheticism. I can only pretend to let myself be taught by the Church the way I "depend" on my faulty calculator: my loyalty will be an act of sentimental affection, not an act of discipleship.

The contracepting Catholic who, for example, claims to be faithful to the Church on social doctrine is in the position of the Briton who is summoned by the Queen to be her Prime Minister: his selection is in reality a matter of democratic political machinations, ceremonially tricked-out as an act of the Royal Will. Is he obeying his monarch in answering her summons? Only in the vacuous sense that a person says Yes to his own invitation. Institutionalized Catholic dissent on contraception makes the hierarchical Church into something like the British monarchy: it is a consciously antiquated ceremonial instrument for injecting a certain pomp into the solemnization of decisions made on grounds wholly unrelated to her logic, purposes and history.



For the vowed religious, the first casualty of the contraceptive mentality is the Church as the focus of religious authority. The realization, perhaps, was gradual, but when prominent theologians, bishops, and entire episcopal conferences distanced themselves from *Humanae vitae* without severing themselves from the Church, the logic of their dissent could hardly be confined to a single issue. In an astonishingly brief span of years the Church has been transformed from the measuring rod to the thing measured; no longer the guarantor of authentic religious life, she is everywhere under suspicion. In liturgy, scripture, pastoral efforts, theology and sacrament, the Church is regarded by entire congregations as guilty until proven innocent, and proof of this innocence is (in these circles) seldom forthcoming.

In the days when contraception was an unreliable affair, and pregnancy was a common consequence of sexual relations, extramarital sex involved a clear offense against charity, and the Church's teachings forbidding adultery and fornication were easily defended on this ground - too easily, in fact. Moreover, the crude

mechanical instrumentation of the older contraceptive devices lent weight (though a specious one) to the argument of preachers that artificial birth control is contrary to nature.³ Once again, the advent of the Pill obliterated both defenses, and the Church's teachings on the spiritual significance of marriage, the body, and sexuality were put into the hands of pastors who were, for the most part, wholly unprepared to understand or communicate them.

Dissenters, on the other hand, pounced on this opportunity, and placed enormous rhetorical stress on the primacy of charity in the Church's moral tradition. No one could deny the centrality of charity in this tradition, but on the level of popular controversy it resulted in the illegitimate derivation of two erroneous propositions: first, that an act that is not a sin against charity is no sin at all; second, that any act done with a charitable intention is for that reason justified. The application to married life virtually wrote itself: contraception involves no obvious sin against charity (for neither husband nor wife is wounded) and therefore involved no sin at all. Or again, if contraception be employed with a charitable intention (making life easier for one's spouse; ensuring more advantages for one's children) it is morally praiseworthy. The theological justification for these arguments, however, necessitated a re-formulation of the Christian imperative of charity and of traditional Catholic moral reasoning. In this new scheme, the morally preferable option is not one that conforms to a relevant principle of conduct but the one that results in more good (i.e., more "pre-moral good") than its rivals. It takes little imagination to devise scenarios in which contraception will result in more pre-moral bounty than other options, and therefore contraception was handily offered to Catholic couples as a licit moral choice.

The chasm that separates those dissenters from *Humanae vitae* that employ this new scheme from orthodox Catholics has been described with felicity and precision by John Finnis⁴, who argues that, while it was the traditional belief of Christians that they were to serve the good, the dissenters hold that our duty is to effect the good.⁵ Now whereas the belief that our Christian duty is to effect the good has been used by Catholic theologians to justify instances of abortion, euthanasia, threatened destruction of civilian populations as a deterrent and so forth, it is contraception that provided the real impulse behind the advancement of this theory, and indeed it is the justification of contraception that continues to pro-

vided the rallying point of dissent in the Church.⁶

Consider once again all that is consequent upon the change from serving the good to effecting the good. Call to mind the direction of change in religious communities in their apostolic involvement over the past 25 years, the de-emphasis on adoration, catechesis, spiritual works of mercy (even the term has become comically antiquated); the new stress on consciousness raising, political action, community organizing, world peace, environmental awareness. I want to stress that none of these latter activities need be pursued in a manner incompatible with traditional moral reasoning, but the fact that this reasoning plays small part in the motivations of religious men and women who champion these causes is evidenced by the rationale commonly given for the moral compromises these tasks ask of them. Call to mind the excuses and justifications frequently offered by priests and nuns acting as university officials or appointed agents of state for their complicity in scandals of political and public life, for their actions that are contrary to Church teaching. Is it not the case, almost without exception, that their plea is to a higher responsibility to effect the good, rather than to serve it? Is it not the case that those whose aim is to cause a certain effect regard their more scrupulous brothers and sisters with Lady Macbeth's exasperation?

Yet I do fear thy nature. It is
too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst
highly, That
wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou'dst have,
great Glamis, That
which cries, "Thus thou must do, if thou have it";
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone.

Translated into contemporary terms, the message runs thus: "Only weaklings let moral principles stand in the way of social change. You can accomplish nothing great if you let yourself be trapped by the snare of holiness. If you're going to succeed, you have to regard success itself as the only gauge of morality. True charity, after all, is not serving the Good, but delivering the goods."

And so it goes, step-by-step, on a gentle downslope,

in the lives of religious: Faith in a provident God gives way to the Faith That Does Justice, which in turns gives way to the Justice That Brings Itself into Being, which turns out, in practical terms, to mean an ideologized justice that must dispense with faith when faith would hinder its full realization. Thus in the space of 25 years the voices that urged us to follow the patriarch Moses in his exodus of liberation now urge us to believe that patriarchy - indeed the very Law by which Moses vindicated himself - constitutes the final and most formidable obstacle to true human freedom. The God of the Patriarchs is worse than the bondage of Pharaoh.

I have pointed to two revolutions in Catholic religious life that were precipitated by the rise of the contraceptive mentality. The first was doctrinal: what Vincentian Fr. Patrick Collins has called (approvingly) the change from “the experience of religious authority to the authority of religious experience”; the demotion of the Church from judge to defendant. The second revolution was moral: the change from serving to effecting the good. The third revolution might broadly be termed spiritual.

From the earliest days of the Church, Christian life has involved asceticism: a regimen of spiritual discipline whereby forgoing the comforts and consolations of bodily life was regarded as training for holiness leading to fuller communion with God. We can distinguish two strands within this tradition: what we might call the asceticism of acceptance or patience, and the asceticism of renunciation. Asceticism of patience asks us to accept with tranquil resolve the unavoidable hardships of life, those from which there is no escape, as a sharing in the blessedness of the world’s poor and as a way of perfection: physical deformity or illness, the hardships of war, the pain of an infertile marriage are examples of these austerities. Asceticism of renunciation involves those hardships that are not inevitable but are undertaken either in conformity to moral principle or as a wholly gratuitous means of discipline aimed at holiness. Now the meaningfulness of the discipline of renunciation is a precarious thing, because it flies in the face of humanistic theories of self-actualization and personal fulfillment, theories which

see voluntary renunciation of a human good as not only absurd but pathological. Noble acceptance of unavoidable suffering (the early death of one’s child, say) can be prized as a “growth experience” in this scheme, but to court pain or diminishment is deprived.

Before the availability of reliable contraception Catholic couples could plausibly be urged to accept the various disciplines of married love as part of an asceticism of patience. With the Pill, the ground changed almost overnight. Now couples were required to make the asceticism of renunciation a part of their married lives, because the twin hardships of sexual abstinence and provision for large families became easily, eminently, avoidable. For a while the question hung precariously in the balance: would Catholic couples accept the Church’s discipline and the new invitation to an asceticism of renunciation, or would they opt for the techno-fix and push voluntary asceticism to the margins of their lives? Not for the first time, they looked to their clergy and religious - those set apart and coached in asceticism - for their clues on how to respond to these two new offers.

Even at this date I find it impossible to believe that a spirited and joyful embrace of *Humanae vitae* by clergy and religious, combined with sound instruction and spiritual aid to the laity, would not have resulted in a general Catholic adherence to the new mode of asceticism.

It didn’t happen that way. With a vehemence that outdid the most truculent layman, Catholic clergy and religious led the charge against *Humanae vitae*,⁷ and I would wager that, given an equal number of randomly selected priests or religious and married laymen, one

would find greater support for the Church’s teaching in the latter group than the former - by far. Re-enter Lady Macbeth:

Nought’s had, all’s spent
Where our desire is got, without content. ‘Tis
safer to be that which we destroy, Than by
destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

Was it merely coincidence that the massive dissent from *Humanae vitae* marched with a near total abandonment

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of the asceticism of renunciation in religious life? I can't offer proof for my hunch, but I doubt it. Even in the crises of the Reformation there was no sea-change in the religious discipline of communities that remained Roman Catholic comparable to the disappearance of fasting, vigils, corporal mortification, penitential labor, and even time set aside for prayer, from the lives of all but a few contemporary religious. Certainly there was a variety of forces set in motion in the aftermath of Vatican II that contributed to the re-fashioning of religious life, and it would be simplistic to point to the rejection of *Humanae vitae* as the *fontes et origo* of every ill, but once human sexuality became assimilated to the number of satisfactions whose exercise belonged to the prerogative of the self-constituting individual, and was consequently emancipated from any larger system of meaning and responsibility, the denial to the self of any and all satisfactions, pleasures, and consolations seemed precariously close to irrational. The notion of rigorous training (the *askesis* from which the classical idea of asceticism is derived) vanished in favor of a number of developmental schemes of monitored growth in which the underlying anthropological assumptions were contrary to those undergirding the older *via perfectionis*. In the new scheme, all men are born good, naturally holy, and their chief requirement is opportunities for education, self-expression, and enrichment of experience in order to become godlike, that is to say fully human. The banisters and railings and fences and other "boundary safeguards" of religious life were discarded, inasmuch as their existence implied notions of trespass and constraint and an innate human tendency to sin. Gone is the rule of *tactus*⁸, the stricture that sent nuns out of the house in pairs, the early curfews, mandatory and distinctive religious garb, the manifold impediments of cloister. Gone are the multitudes of requisite permissions; gone is all but minimum responsibility for the use of time and money - both of which used to be viewed as the common property of the community, not perquisites doled out to the individual for his discretionary employment.⁹ Gone is an entire fabric of sexual discipline.

"Unsex me here!" It is not, I believe, tendentious to maintain that the consequence of the obliteration of asceticism in religious life has been sexual anarchy. The evidence for this is, regrettably, overwhelmingly abundant. It is a curious paradox, but even though generally speaking priests were never less masculine and sisters less feminine than today, the libido is at the same time all but out of control. Few religious, however, seem willing to

countenance a restoration of the former discipline. I recently attended a day-long workshop on clergy sexual misconduct that dealt with the problem entirely in terms of "professional boundaries." Do you see the irony? Having cast away the framework of prayerful asceticism assembled by countless monks, priests and nuns over seventeen centuries, human nature "actualized" itself in horrifying ways, and we now have to improvise hastily by tacking in place the legal boundaries appropriate to dentists and high school guidance counselors.

We are frequently invited, sometimes by fellow Catholics, to view the scandal of priestly and religious pedophilia (and other sexual abuses) as an occasion to despair, as an assault on our faith. Now I believe as firmly as anyone that clergy pedophilia is an abomination and a horror - but it certainly doesn't rattle my faith: after all, when the prayer of Lady Macbeth goes up, when we trade in the multiform protections and incentives of a responsible tradition of asceticism for the wisdom of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, one would expect it to breed maggots. Personally my faith would be more shaken if the contrary were true, if those who had thrown over the cautions urged by Benedict and Francis and Ignatius and Teresa found a surfeit of joy and energy in their apostolic lives, a radiant and unshakeable chastity, an enviable psychic and sexual tranquility; if they attracted an abundance of new vocations from the brightest and most vital of Catholic youth; if their prayer out-shone their forebears in its vigor, profundity and fruitfulness - that would unsettle my faith, for it would mean that the wisdom of this world had proved wiser than the inheritance we have from the martyrs. True, all the results aren't in yet, but I believe this turn of events ... unlikely.

Has religious life remained unaffected by the contraceptive mentality? The answer may be forthcoming if we rephrase the question: Have Catholic religious been successful at transmitting and multiplying the abundance of life they enjoyed before the crisis of contraception made itself felt in their lives? The only religious who can say Yes without duplicity are those who failed to "unsex" themselves doctrinally, morally and spiritually in the time of struggle. On the other hand, those Third Orders of the Unsexed are heading remorselessly down the course marked out by their ancient, and so-very-contemporary, patroness.

She should have died hereafter;

There would have been time for such a word.

NOTES

1 I have unlikely (and unsympathetic) support for these claims from Charles Curran, who admitted that proponents of contraception hugely underestimated the negation of the Church's doctrinal authority entailed by reversal of past teaching. See "Ten Years Later," *Commonweal*, July 7, 1978, pp. 426-30.

2 Of course, my analogy is crippled by the fact that no one pretends that a calculator is an ultimate norm of reliability (as is claimed for the Church), nor does the calculator (as the Church does) make this claim for itself. The parallelism is based on the fact that for both Church and calculator dependability is entirely conditional on the integrity of its operations and decisions, since these are not open to direct inspection. If one answer be suspect, all are.

3 It is, of course; but not because latex and nonoxynol-9 are themselves "un-natural." An aesthetic and physicalist repugnance to contraceptive appliances has led to an interest in NFP on the part of green party and environmental enthusiasts who would embrace it as a kind of vegetarian ("no added preservatives or artificial sweeteners") birth control. Where the authentic discipline of married love is absent, NFP is morally no more un-natural than the Pill.

4 *Moral Absolutes* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), p. 49.

5 If my first duty is to serve the good, I will refuse to violate an exceptionless moral norm, no matter what consequences threaten. For example: even if I will lose my job and my family will be deprived of material support unless I perjure myself on a police report, I must tell the truth and deal with the consequences as best I can. However, if my duty is to effect the good, I will choose whatever means produces the greatest aggregate of good results, irrespective of the moral norms that may be violated in so doing. If I have to lie so that my children can eat, and the lie will produce no countervailing harm to other people, I will choose the advantageous lie.

6 In this opinion I am following John Finnis, *op. cit.*, p. 85

7 For a candid account of the clerical-academic orchestration of the assault on *Humanae vitae*, see Charles Curran's contribution in *Jolcmeys*, edited by Gregory Baum, New York, 1977.

8 It forbade a religious to touch another person.

9 I do not mean to imply that these strictures were equally valuable, or even that some were not harmful and in need of replacement. I simply want to call attention to 1) their earlier comprehensiveness and complexity; 2) the suddenness and thoroughness of their disappearance; 3) the change in anthropology that occasioned their fall.